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Congress will pass, and President Barack Obama will sign into law, health care reform legislation by year's end, U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire predicted yesterday after hosting a sometimes-emotional forum on the matter in Ambridge.

Both congressional chambers are expected to cap months of debate with votes on the matter in the next few weeks, said Mr. Altmire, D-McCandless. His event, which drew about 200 people to Ambridge Area High School, came just days after a key affirmative vote by the Senate Finance Committee.

The congressman said he believes the final version of the legislation will include insurance reforms and help for small businesses, and will bring more people into the system, likely through a requirement that individuals have insurance.

"And you're going to get cost containment," he added. "Hopefully -- enough that I will be able to support it."

If all that comes to pass, and if there is an "exchange" enabling people to compare health care plans based on various criteria including cost, quality and access to providers, "That's a pretty good outcome," he said.

The crowd that gathered in the high school's auditorium for the "town hall meeting" was orderly, though in several instances individuals shouted comments either at the congressman or at others in the room who disagreed with their views.

When Mr. Altmire polled audience members about their feelings toward Mr. Obama's health care proposals, just over two-thirds of those in the auditorium stood to signal their opposition.

Questions and comments from the audience ran the gamut, from the single-payer option and tort reform to how members of Congress could believe they have a mandate from the public on health care given their low public opinion ratings.

Louis Tarasi Jr., an attorney from Edgeworth, said inclusion of a public option in the legislation was crucial to ensuring affordability of health care.

Karen Reeher, of Ambridge, said people should be wary of government-controlled health care.

One man, who said he served in the U.S. Marines, leapt from his seat and shouted at Mr. Altmire: "I want representatives to read the bills!"

Mr. Altmire suggested that remark should have come earlier in the process when health care discussions had just begun. He said his reluctance and that of others in Congress to sign on to earlier versions of the legislation slowed down the process and gave that man and others the opportunity to be heard on the issue.

During the meeting, the congressman said he supports reform, provided it comes as a result of the right legislation that addresses key issues.

"The worst thing we can do is make the system worse," he said. "A close second is doing nothing."